



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SOME MYTHS AND ARTS OF JAPAN

BY ELIZABETH J. COATSWORTH

THE Japanese are famous for their capacity for adopting and adapting the customs and arts of other peoples. It is this power that has made possible to them the rapid assimilation of Western ideas and civilization, which is going on to-day, though so new is the process that here and there one finds strange misfits—such as the use of the foreign nightshirt as a street costume among the lower classes in hot weather. Such little errors will disappear in time. No better proof is needed than the fashion in which Chinese architecture, gods, literature, ceramics, music and all the other arts of civilization have undergone a nationalization that leaves them with a distinct and separate charm of their own. As in Europe, the Church was the great teacher and propagator of foreign ideas. Learning and beauty grew up under the shadow of the Buddhist temples and pagodas, just as they clustered in the West about the cloisters and high towers of the cathedrals.

So accustomed are we to our own art and civilization that we scarcely realize how varied are the sources from which they sprang. We acknowledge a great debt to Rome—broken gifts saved for us in the stately arms of the bishops. But do we often remember that our alphabet goes back at least to the Egyptians? Do we appreciate the meaning of the fact that nearly half the words we use have a Latin derivation? That we owe our numerals to the Arabs? How many people know that the custom of shaving the heads of the monks originated with the priests of Isis in an attempt to imitate the sun and its rays, and that the high headdress of the bishops was once the open-mouthed fish head worn by the Babylonian clergy? Whence sprang all the customs of the Church? They are far older than Christ. They have a history more remote than that of Rome. In our literature, what is the debt of the Elizabethans to Theocritus, who first sang that pastoral they in turn learned from the Italians?

Through all our lives run strange threads of the past, but we are too accustomed to them even to recognize them as strange and thrilling too. Perhaps the only reason that the Japanese have borrowed more obviously than we lies in the fact that their Rome is still vital across a narrow sea from them, while ours had the destroying centuries like a wall between us. And India, their Greece, still sent forth its mystics and missionaries when ours was waiting, its spontaneous genius changed to ornate formalism, a sealed treasure for the mailed hand of the Crusader.

It is because India, China, and Japan flourish side by side that we can trace connections between them more easily than those between us and long dead nations. Nor are Greece and India the ultimate sources of inspiration for East or West. The influences grow less distinct, but we can discern strange fusions. We remember that Alexander led his armies into India and returned to Greece with many native craftsmen; that Greece had known much communication with Persia, and had been profoundly influenced by Egypt, a country which in turn had traded and warred with the nations of the East. Behind Persia loom the almost mythical empires, Assyria, Babylonia, with their winged animals and huge temples. There, were conquering nations which took slaves and assimilated cultures, which sent their emissaries into far places. We think that the world has grown small only since we invented the railroad, the steamboat, wireless telegraphy and the cable. Yet it has always been small, not for the individual indeed but for the nations. Siam has legends of a "prince of Rome", and even in comparatively modern times the Spaniards expelled the Mohammedans from their borders and set forth exploring to the uttermost ends of the earth, only to find the Moros (or Moors), as they called them, a Mohammedan people, settled in their new territory of the Philippines. The Aztecs used the Mongolian chronological system. The primitive art of the Pacific, whether in America or Asia, or the islands of the sea, is almost identical. The curling beam ends of Scandinavian architecture are remnants of the hooded *naga* heads that rear upright from the roofs of Siamese temples to-day.

As one enters the Japanese temples only the more obvious relationships are noticeable to most of us. There are the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas sitting on their lotuses in utter composure. Usually they are clad in a robe with very simple folds, showing the bare breast. They have lost the ornamentations of southern Buddhism, where the saints look like dancing girls mincing forth in their jewels. The type of face is finer than that of the Chinese Buddhas; more spiritual, in better proportion. Almost every one is a work of art, beautiful on lacquer and gilding, placed behind an offering table which has none of the tawdriness that too often detracts from the effectiveness of a Chinese temple. Here and there in the simplicity of the figures, in the effect of form under the garments, in the arrangement of the folds, in the type of the face, one suddenly has a swift recollection of the Greek, and with it a realization that the art of Northern India was a Græco-Hindu art that brought to China and Japan many of the old Greek traditions as well as the Hindu ornateness. In the museum at Kioto is a piece of fresco found in Western China startlingly like the paintings in the catacombs. It shows the face and breast of a man, with long straight nose, Occidental eyes, a mouth hidden under a close red beard of the same tone as the wavy red hair above the broad forehead. There are also some stone heads that might be put in any collection of Greek antiquities without fear of detection, at least from the amateur.

But while the Greek influence remains evident, the groundwork is of course Hindu. The pose of the Buddha, the curls of the head, the mark above the brow, the symbolism of the hands, all came from India, though most of the ornamentation, the crowns and jewels and elaborate robes, have been sacrificed by a severer artistic taste. Sometimes in the temples, but more often in caves and weird haunts of nature, the Japanese preserve the Hindu type of God, deities far older surely than Buddha but appropriated by Buddhism for its own uses, as Christianity took over the gods of the North under the title of saint. In the darkness of some cavern one will see a figure with many arms brandishing symbolic weapons, dressed with Hindu jewels and fluttering ribbons. Sometimes there is only one head, sometimes three, six, or eleven like the skull-wreathed Thibetan gods one

sees in China. Almost always the place chosen is strange and unusual—suitable, the Japanese seem to feel, for outlandish deities. Kwannon is the great exception, for her images are often found in the temples. She has two distinct forms in which she appears. The Hindu form is the more common; the Thousand-Handed Kwannon, the Horse-Headed Kwannon, and all the rest, crowned and bedecked and repulsive, like a sort of queen spider. The many hands are supposed to be armed against evil, the many eyes looking for wrong-doing. The same applies to the temple guardian demons who brandish weapons at the doors of the temples. No amount of philosophy, however, can cover the fact that the figures were originally primitive and ferocious and the symbolism only the cloak of later times, put on in the tremendous synthesis of the local religions with the abstract conceptions of Buddhism, when any god or goddess might find a place in popular esteem by being considered as an earlier or later incarnation of the Buddha.

It is strange that the Japanese have on the whole preferred this conception to the modified Chinese form of Kwannon wherein she is represented as a beautiful woman in long robes of white, carrying in slim hands a willow twig and a vase, from which she pours forth the water of life. Like the Virgin Mary, she is the great intercessor between gods and men. Her mercy is boundless. Like the Virgin, also, she is especially the patroness of those upon the sea. She is all-wise. In the councils of the Chinese Pantheon (a curious mixture of the emperor of Heaven and his court, Buddha and his saints, Confucius and Laotze and their philosophers, with a dash of dragon kings to lend variety) it is she who always gives the best advice. It is she who interposes between the sinner and his punishment. Very often there is a kneeling child near her, and in paintings she is represented with a dove flying towards her, holding a rosary in its mouth. Looking at her, one believes the assertions of the writers who declare that the higher forms of Buddhism (she is connected entirely with what might be termed the "high church") are greatly modified by the Nestorian Christianity which at one time flourished in China, as Marco Polo bears witness. There is no more gracious figure in the East than that of the white

Kwannon, with her drooping form, high white headdress, and gentle face. Yet perversely enough the Japanese, even when following the Chinese tradition, are prone to add the slight curling mustache of the Buddha to the mouth of the lady goddess.

The Chinese influence has profoundly modified the conception of the Buddhas, suggesting the way to simplicity, introducing new robes, developing the architecture of the temples. Just as one finds the almost pure forms of the Hindu gods, one comes across a few entirely Chinese figures in long robes of state, holding the wand of office upright in their hands. But these are very rare. For that matter so are the statues of Japanese deities, for in the national religion, Shintoism, the gods were not represented but only their symbols, the most common of which is the mirror which represents the sun and the sun goddess Amaterasu, the ancestress of the imperial house of Japan.

The majority of the temple Buddhas and the wayside Jizus present no one national achievement but a combination of them all. They are born of a Hindu-Græco parentage, schooled in China for centuries, and now wedded to Japanese æsthetic simplicity. Thus in the temples and by the road one may study the tale of influences and counter influences. One may see borrowings from other lands preserved intact by the natural conservatism of religion, or, more often, adapted to the tastes of the people. As one might expect to find, the gods form the most attractive and obvious picture book of the race's æsthetic history.

* * *

Japan is full of tales and legends that challenge comparison with the folk lore of the West; there are fairy maidens of the seas who take their lovers to glorious palaces under the waves where every day is a hundred years in length, and at last yield to their entreaty to revisit their homes, giving as a last gift the fatal box that must not be reopened. There are the youths who go forth to fight the dragons, which have been devastating the land, and which they slay, aided only by the young maid of honor—but here we get a touch of Japanese sternness that our legends will have none of—who cuts her throat to loosen the muscles when she finds that she is unable to play the flute by which the dragon is to be lured from his den. There are tales of friendly animals

and a hundred others, that remind one of the ancient stories of one's childhood, whether they were borrowed one from another or sprang from the same obscure source.

The same question of source occurs in regard to the sacred animals of the East, whose parallels we find in our own legends, imported perhaps at some unknown date. King of animals in the Orient is the dragon. It is the emblem of the Chinese emperors. It is the ruler of all waters; it is the guardian of the buried treasures of the earth (that is why the Chinese are so unwilling to disturb it by digging mines); it is the master of the clouds. Dr. W. E. Griffis quotes an account of nine young dragons that is too characteristic of Oriental fancy to suppress. The first among the young dragons loves harmonious sounds, and therefore the tops of most temple bells are cast as a curved dragon; the second "delights in the sound of musical instruments, hence the koto or horizontal harp, and the tsuzumi or girl's drum, struck with the fingers, are ornamented with the figure of the dragon; the third is fond of drinking and likes all stimulating liquors, therefore goblets and drinking cups are adorned with likenesses of this creature; the fourth likes steep and dangerous places, hence gables, towers and projecting beams of temples and pagodas have carved images of this dragon upon them; the fifth is a great destroyer of living things, fond of killing and bloodshed, therefore swords are decorated with his golden figure; the sixth loves learning and delights in literature, hence covers and title pages of books and literary works show his picture; the seventh is renowned for its power of hearing; the eighth enjoys sitting, hence easy chairs are carved in its image; the ninth loves to bear weight, therefore the feet of tables and hibachi are shaped like his feet."

At least the quotation gives some idea of how much the figure of the dragon is used. It often appears in literature. Miss Peake has translated an anonymous Japanese poem of the feudal days, a Samurai speaking to the dragons on his sword hilts:

Within my treasure-house a casket lies,
And shut therein two dragons writhe and moan;
As I keep vigil in the night alone
My spirit is tormented by their cries.

Be still, my swords. Alas! not yet, not yet
The day of action dawns; ye need not fear,
Moment by moment it is drawing near.
Be silent. Do you dream that I forget?

Perhaps we never stop to realize how strange it is that among the saints there is room for one to win his place by the reputed actual saving of a lady from a dragon. And yet this is the story of Saint George of England, and considered in no allegorical light by the mediæval church. The wealth-hoarding and slaughter-bringing dragons early trailed across the legends of Europe, bringing with them desolation and forming pretexts for love affairs between lorn damsels and heroes. The Eastern mind sympathized with the dragon and made it the emblem of rule. I know of only one instance where anyone attempted to destroy a dragon, for they were usually regarded as sacred and of incomparable power. The West, however, true to its temperament, preferred to tell of dragons conquered and slain by the wit of man. The dragon is almost the symbol of Nature in the East, and the different ways of meeting it seem to form an allegory of the Oriental mystic reverence of Nature and the European scientific conquest of it.

The second of the sacred animals is the kilin or kirin, which corresponds with our unicorn, believed in Europe to be the purest of animals, which could be captured only by a virgin. He prances beside the conquering lion on the English coat of arms; he had his place in the Church pageants of Rome. Returning to Asia we discover him as the portent of good fortune to earth, so gentle that he never steps on a live insect, nor feeds on growing grass.

No creature, except the dragon, is so often represented in Japanese art as the phoenix. Despite the fact that it is supposed to possess the head of a pheasant, the beak of a swallow, the neck of a tortoise and the features of the dragon and fish, it looks like our own representation of the bird, a graceful thing with sweeping tail plumage. Its five colors symbolize the Oriental cardinal virtues of uprightness of mind, obedience, justice, fidelity and benevolence. (It is curious how even in the virtues one can trace the idea of the superior and inferior and their mutual obligations—

uprightness of mind, justice and benevolence due from the superior, obedience and fidelity from the inferior.)

In our legends there is supposed to be only one phoenix, that dies on the funeral pyre to be reborn from its own ashes. Naturally the phoenix has thus come to stand with us for eternal life, and was indeed used by the old Church writers as a symbol of Christ, voluntarily offering itself to death, and rising into renewed life.

The fourth of the sacred animals is the tortoise, a symbol of long life; embroidered on wedding garments, painted on the wrappings of New Year gifts. In Chinese legend it is supposed to have borne upon its shell the basis of moral teaching and the secrets of the unseen. It is more revered in China than among the practical Japanese. When the fishermen around any of the seaports haul a large one in with their catch, they find a Chinese merchant to buy it (last summer one paid a hundred and ten yen for a tortoise caught near Yokohama). The Chinaman then carves his name on the shell, that the animal may know to whom it owes its life, and taking it out into deep water, allows it to go free, thus ensuring a prosperous long life for himself.

* * *

These are but a few of the phases of the debt which Japan, like any other nation, owes to other peoples of the past, nations which obviously or obscurely have also been a source of inspiration to us. Often influences work in the most unexpected ways. To take a recent and unexpected example, one may quote the color prints, especially those of Utomaro, Hakusai, and Hiroshige, artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who have had a deep influence upon the use of line and the composition of the modern European poster school. The simplification of lines till only those essential to the central idea remain, was a heritage to the school of the color prints from earlier artists. But most of the composition, that seems so essentially foreign to European eyes, does not spring from any Chinese or Japanese earlier theory of art. There is a use of the perspective that has no place in true Oriental painting. The boldness of the composition differs from that of previous painters. Yet since 1636, with the extermination of the last Japanese Christians, the coun-

try had been closed to intercourse with the outside world, even its own sea-faring junks destroyed. How, then, to this hermit nation could there come any artistic impulse from thousands of miles away?

But Japan was not quite closed to foreign trade. When the last native Christians were holding out in a castle against many times their number, the Dutch merchants turned their guns upon the castle and battered the breach through which the besiegers poured, massacring men, women, and children. It was perhaps as a reward for this that an exception was made in favor of the Dutch merchants when the door of Japan was closed, and they were allowed to come to one tiny island off Nagasaki, to trade with the Japanese under humiliating restrictions. It was through these Dutch merchants that the Japanese artists learned something of Occidental painting. Some of them even tried oil paints but gave it up; they repudiated the realism of the figures, but accepted lessons in perspective and composition, so welding the new influence into their own art that the whole thing seems distinctly Japanese. To-day our artists are inspired by an art which drew its inspiration in turn from painters whom we have long ignored as having taught us all that we could learn from them. As in chemistry two substances will join and form a third and entirely different thing, so is the new in artistic progress rising constantly from combinations of the old.

The East and West have met more often than any man is wise enough to know. But never before have they come face to face as entire civilizations. Japan has assimilated the learning of China and much of that of India, but she was taught by the Church, and wisdom came slowly through the hands of the priests. Now false and true wisdom pour in upon her. The scamp and the saint thrust their knowledge before her. But though she has made a few mistakes in her choice, slowly out of the welter of new forces is emerging the ordered modern nationality.

ELIZABETH J. COATSWORTH.